

The Civil War was the time for 'Trust'

By Roger Boye

FROM THE reader mailbag, a trio of questions has popped up:

Q—A few weeks ago you mentioned that the words "In God We Trust" appear on every United States coin currently minted. Why were those words put on our coins in the first place? Don't they violate the principle of separation of church and state?

A—Credit a minister from Ridleyville, Pa., with the idea. In 1861, the Rev. M. R. Watkinson wrote the secretary of the treasury, asking that God be recognized on U. S. coins.

The idea was supported by President Abraham Lincoln and members of his cabinet [an example of the increased religious sentiment in the country during the Civil War, say some historians].

Several mottoes were considered in 1863, such as "Our Country and Our God," "God, Our Trust," and "Our Trust Is in God." The treasury secretary suggested in late 1863 that the

motto be "In God We Trust," and it first appeared on the 2-cent piece in 1864.

Gradually, it was placed on all our coins, with some exceptions. For example, the motto did not appear on the \$10 and \$20 gold pieces of 1907. Some coin historians say this was because President Theodore Roosevelt objected. Wrote Roosevelt in 1907: "To put such a motto on coins, or to use it in any kindred manner, not only does no good but does positive harm, and is in effect irreverence which comes dangerously close to sacrilege."

But many people complained about the missing motto, and in 1908 Congress ordered that the motto be restored.

In spite of some objections, the words have not been taken to violate the principle of separation of church and state.

Incidentally, the motto was added to paper money as the result of legislation signed in July, 1955.

Q—I have yet to find a 1976-dated nickel or dime in circulation. Are they making them?

How long does it take to get one in change?

A—Yes, the Mint is making 1976-dated nickels and dimes. The coins are distributed on demand to banks by the Federal Reserve. It usually takes several months for a coin with a new date to circulate widely.

Q—I have several large serving spoons made from melted-down silver coins during the Civil War. I was wondering if there is any coin collector value to these spoons, or should I just keep them as a conversation item?

A—The fact that your spoons are made from melted silver coins does not give them a special value to a coin collector. However, your spoons [if indeed made during the Civil War] are antiques and likely are valuable to a collector of antique spoons.

If you have questions about coins and collecting, send them to me, in care of Room 414, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Av., Chicago, Ill. 60611. But, please, do not send coins.